

## **The Walk** by **Collie Parkillo**

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**Summary:** Every year, 100 boys participate in the country-wide Long Walk. And this year Eddie Kaspbrak is one of them. An AU in which the characters of Stephen King's IT participate in Stephen King's The Long Walk. Gen, but undertones of RichieEddie.

# 1. Chapter 1

"Eddie, why?"

He clenched his aspirator in one fist, his other hand taken by his mother. She tugged on it like he was a rag doll, her expression waiflike. Her nails dug into his wrist, and as he began to move away they slipped off and she moved to the sleeve of his jacket.. He swore she was going to tear it. He hadn't packed another jacket-was he supposed to? The rulebook hadn't said anything about that. But it got really cold up in Maine, probably no colder than his Connecticut hometown, but it was probably best to have a working jacket.

"I don't know, Mom. I don't know."

"Eddie, you..." She trailed off. "Eddie, why would you do something like this?! Don't you know how much you have back home?! You've even got a scholarship at the local university! Please, Eddie!"

"The backout date was yesterday, Mom. You drove me. I don't know why you drove me if you didn't want me to go." He didn't really believe it himself. He got out of the car, and she followed. She looked so much older somehow. He knew she wasn't young anymore, truthfully, he didn't believe she ever had been, but she looked at him like a woman on the last legs of life.

She didn't respond, only led him up to the turnstyle where a khaki-clad soldier stood. She fished around in her purse for a blue card, then handed it to him. Gulping, he swiped it in the silver turnstyle. Didn't they have things like this in New York City? On the subway? He'd always wanted to go to the city. Maybe this was close enough. A message flashed on the green screen by the soldier's seat.

KASPBRAK, EDWARD LOUIS

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

OK-OK-OK

He and his mother stood there silently for a moment. "Eddie," she

said. She was wearing out his name. "Eddie." Stop saying that, he wanted to shout. Just stop it! Just say whatever it is you want to say, don't say my name!

"What, Mom?"

"I love you, Eddie."

"I know, Mom." I know. I know from how you won't let me go to any of the school dances, or go out after seven at night, or get a driver's license.

"You've got your aspirator? Eddie, I don't think this is such a good idea, not with your asthma."

"Goodbye, Mom."

"Eddie!" She enveloped him in a hug. It felt like a death grip. "My Eddie, my baby..."

He freed himself from her embrace. The soldier took his card and silently allowed him to pass through. He didn't look back. He couldn't look back, because he'd see her looking back at him with those dead, watery eyes. Her Eddie. Her baby. Her Eddie, off to join the Long Walk. He bit his lip and closed his eyes, trying to process for a moment what had happened. He felt a cough rising in his throat and swallowed it as best he could. He wanted to start off good and strong.

What a fucking laugh, he thought. Good and strong, my ass. You're asthmatic and sickly. He opened his eyes, took a deep, raspy breath and stepped forward. He wouldn't think like that. That's what his mother would think. That wasn't what he thought. He was a good, strong boy. He'd tried out for the soccer team and sure, he'd had an asthma attack, but at least he'd tried. He'd had the willpower to at least be able to try. And he could run alright. More importantly, he could walk. There was no way you could get out of breath walking. Right? Right?

"Are you ready for the walk of your life?!" A voice mimicking the voice of a TV advertiser made Eddie nearly jump out of his skin. Somebody had come up behind him and clapped him on the back.

"Oh, man, did I scare ya?" The voice changed from the TV advertiser to a higher, younger sounding one. Eddie turned around. The boy had a smattering of freckles on his pale face, and hair the color of caramel. But the thing that was most noticeable about him was the thick, square glasses over his eyes. The piece that went over the bridge of his nose had a piece of duct tape across it, Eddie thought that his mother would say he looked like a troublemaker.

"No! No, I'm fine. Honest. And I don't know if I'm ready. Is anybody ready?"

"Good point." The boy laughed. "Richie Tozier's my name, voices are my game. I hail from good old New York. Who're you?"

"Eddie Kaspbrak. From Connecticut."

"Eddie! What a name! Eddie! Does anybody ever call you Eds?"

"Anybody ever call you annoying?" He felt lame, pretending he knew how boys his age conversed. Should he have put in a swear word there? He'd kind of wanted to say 'pain in the ass,' but something in him stopped him. He felt like his mother was still watching. Like she would somehow hear him say it. But what he'd said made Richie Tozier from New York cackle.

"Good one, Eds! Boy, I like you." He grinned. Eddie looked back at the parking lot behind the turnstyle. His mother's blue Prius was gone. He looked back at Richie. Next to Richie, he could really tell how short he was. It was kind of humiliating. He barely reached Richie's neck. And when he looked forward, there was the road. The white line down the middle went on for as far as Eddie's eyes could see, and he could practically see the heat steaming off of the pavement. 8:53 AM wasn't really a hot time of day, but he figured that by noon it would be burning up. "What's on your mind?" Richie asked.

"The road's gonna be pretty hot soon."

"You're looking pretty hot. I'm feeling pretty hot. Won't be a problem." Eddie decided he had no idea what any of what Richie Tozier said meant. But he didn't feel pretty hot. He realized he was

still clutching his aspirator and quickly shoved it into the pocket of his jacket before Richie could comment on it. He spotted a group of boys sitting on the edge of the road. As if reading his mind, Richie asked jovially "Shall we go join them?"

"I guess."

Three boys sat on the concrete side of the road. One was small and lanky, with dark hair and dark eyes and a packsack with lots of what looked like boy scout buttons on it tied around his back. Next to him was a taller boy with hair that was bright red and curly. He held a moleskine notebook and a ballpoint pen. The third boy was chubbier, with short, spiky blond hair and beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. Eddie felt really rude thinking it, but he wondered what a guy like that was doing in the Walk. But if he was there he had to have passed the physical test just like they all had.

"Hey," Richie said.

The dark-haired Boy Scout looked up. "Hello." He smiled. "I'm Stan Uris. What's your name?"

"Richie Tozier. My pal here is Eddie Kaspbrak, but I call him Eds."

Eddie's face reddened. Since when were they pals? And 'Eds' sounded like something his mother would've made up. "Don't call me Eds," he blurted out.

Stan Uris laughed. "B-Bill Denbrough," the redhead said. At first, Eddie thought he was just stuttering because he was nervous. But it didn't sound like a nervous stutter. It sounded more...inherent. Like he was used to it. "Nice to m-meet you."

"Ben Hanscom," the chubby boy said. His voice shook a little. They sat there in silence for a few moments, seeming to ponder the fact that these weren't just lambs to the slaughter but honest to god human beings with names..

Stan Uris was the one who broke the silence. "The Walk's in my blood. My uncle was in the Long Walk."

"Did he win?" Richie asked. There was something in his tone that

made Eddie think he was making fun of him. Stan was silent. He seemed about to say something when someone sauntered over and kicked Ben Hanscom in the rear. Ben whirled around. The boy in question was a tall, pimply boy with dark, grimy-looking hair and a poor complexion.

"What's a fatty like you doing in the Long Walk?" The boy grinned.

"Screw off!" Ben's eyes had narrowed. "I'll walk over your dead body! Just you wait!" But his voice was still shaking.

The boy laughed raucously.

"Wh-who do you think you are?" Bill Denbrough asked.

"Henry Bowers is my name. Remember it when it's in the papers after I win. Oh, wait, you'll be dead, so you won't remember."

Richie stood up. "You're real sure of that, aren't you?" He stepped closer to Henry Bowers. "Really sure? You sure that you're not going to end up dead meat on the road like the rest of us? Got something special up your sleeve-or down your pants, if that's how you roll-that the rest of us don't?" He took another step towards him. "Well, buddy, have I got some news for you." His face was inches from Henry's now. "You're gonna die just like the rest of us. Except for that lucky winner. Which I can tell for sure won't be you." A crowd of boys had drawn around their little circle. Eddie wondered if Richie had a death wish. Henry was about to take a swing at him. Hint 13, Eddie wanted to yell. Conserve energy whenever possible! Don't get in a fight!

But luckily, that was when The Major said it for him. "Hint 13, boys."

He had seemed to have come out of nowhere. The military superhero all the country adored. The man who ran the Long Walk. Right here, in the flesh. He could see himself in The Major's mirrored sunglasses. Eddie felt another cough rise in his throat. Henry Bowers stopped mid-punch. "Sorry, sir." He glowered at Richie, then sat down. Richie sat down beside Eddie.

They all knew what was going to happen now. The Major started to read off the list of names, alphabetically organized. He had a pile of

leaves of paper in one hand that all had numbers on them. Eddie had always wondered who printed those papers. That would be one hell of a job. He started with A. The first boy had some kind of Greek last name, Angelakos or Argitakos or something. Henry Bowers stalked up to receive his #7. Bill Denbrough was #11. Ben Hanscom was #21. A lumbering boy named Patrick Hockstetter was #22. Finally, he, Eddie Kaspbrak, wandered up to meet The Major, a #30 pinned on his shirt. The ink smelled fresh. Richie didn't go up until late, and was given #91. Stan Uris, who soon became #93, walked up like he was receiving a diploma.

"It is now 8:56," The Major said. "Line up on the starting line."

Eddie followed Richie and Stan. "He talked to me," Stan whispered. "He talked to me. He said he was a Scout as a kid, too. I think he likes me."

"Is it really worth it to have The Major like you?" Richie said. He sounded almost sad, nothing like the Richie who'd clapped him on the back and called him Eds just a few minutes ago.

Food belts and canteens were being passed down, like papers in a classroom. Take one and pass it down, Eddie thought, and almost giggled. They were just kids. Just kids. Teenagers. And they were in the Long Walk. Imagine that. People had always said the Walk was a boys' sport, as was demonstrated by the fact that those over eighteen couldn't enter. Eddie had always thought that was-dare he use the word-fucked up.

The Major raised his pistol. There was a moment of absolute silence.

The shot rang out. And they were off.

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**Well. This is exciting. I am certainly excited to write this.**

## 2. Chapter 2

Eddie had never really paid attention to the way people walked until it was all there was to look at it. Richie almost strutted, like he had somewhere important to go all the time. Ben took big steps, not hurrying, his gaze planted ahead. Bill took smaller, faster steps, but at the same time they looked very deliberate. Stan walked with purpose, his head bobbing a little as he stepped. Henry Bowers was nowhere in sight, so Eddie couldn't observe how he was walking. That probably wasn't that much of a loss.

"D-do you think anybody's ever died this early on?" Bill asked.

"That's morbid," Ben said. "I don't want to think about that. I don't think you should think about it either. You'll make yourself nervous."

"N-no, it's not for m-me." Ben looked at him quizzically. Eddie fell into step beside them, keen to listen. "M-my best friend, M-Mike Hanlon. H-he and I made a pr-promise, that I w-would write about the W-Walk and he'd write about back home and we'd exchange. W-we're from Maine. So I'll s-see him on the way."

"What're you writing about?" Richie had come over, too.

"J-just wh-what I'm feeling. What I'm s-seeing. Y-you know."

"Got a pretty bad stutter there, don't you, Maine-boy?" Henry Bowers. Eddie immediately slowed down. He felt like a coward. "Kind of a pity that the state poster boy is a sissy like you." He eyed Bill's moleskine notebook. Eddie was so focused on watching the scene that he didn't notice when a strangled, raspy cough forced itself out of his mouth. Shit. His throat felt dry.

What people didn't get about asthma was that it was a hundred times worse than a normal cough. When he coughed even a little, he felt like he'd swallowed sandpaper. He blindly groped for his aspirator, spraying it into his mouth and gasping a sigh of relief when the feeling subsided. Unfortunately, Henry Bowers had turned around and was leering at him.



"Is that a fucking aspirator?!"

Eddie shoved the cursed device back in his jacket pocket. "What's it to you?" He said crossly.

"They let you on the Walk with a fucking aspirator?!" He laughed wildly. "The Long Walk is a fucking sham, everybody. First stuttering sissies and now sons-of-bitches who can't even breathe."

"Lay off him, Bowers," Richie said, his tone dangerous. Eddie thought they were going to start fighting again, but the monotonous voices of the soldiers pierced the air and brought them out of it.

"Warning. Warning 93." It was Stan. He'd dropped something that looked like a book on the ground and had bent down to pick it up. He had it in his hands, then dropped it again with the butterfingers clumsiness of a comic book character and bent down again. Richie, Eddie, Bill, and Ben walked backwards and watched him with almost horrid fascination,

"L-leave it!" Bill shouted.

Stan looked at him, but if he heard him, ignored him. He scooped the book up and resumed walking at a decent pace. Henry Bowers had disappeared. Eddie wondered if Henry was afraid of Richie, or if it was the other way around. Stan's nose was in his book, and Eddie thought that must have been why he dropped it in the first place. He wasn't looking where he was going.

"That wasn't a very good idea," Ben said to Stan. "Think about it, what's more important, that book or your life?"

"Y-you called me morbid," Bill said, and both laughed. There was something about Bill. Eddie couldn't put his finger on what it was, but he had this quality about him, something that made him inescapably likable. Maybe it was that his face was just so innocent or maybe it was the way he joked like any other boy even with his stutter. Eddie couldn't imagine Bill getting shot down. Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe Bill was the lucky winner.

"So, Eddie, you've got asthma," Richie said, falling into step beside

him.

"Water is wet."

"Geez. You aren't a happy camper right now, are you? But anyways. How'd you pass the physical with that?"

"I dunno. My lungs were just good that day, I guess."

"Luck, I see."

Richie was well-built, there was no question how he'd passed the physical. He was lanky and long-legged, but his legs looked thick and strong. "I guess you could say that. Listen, Richie, I kinda just want to process what's going on right now. We can talk about the physical later."

"Gotcha." Richie reached over and ruffled his hair and then walked away. Eddie wondered what the hell Richie was trying to say, doing that. It felt like the kind of thing a big brother would do, but there was nothing big brotherly about Richie. He seemed more the little brother type. Eddie subconsciously wondered what his mother would have thought of Richie. She wouldn't have liked him, that was for sure.

Up ahead, Henry had fallen in with a group of boys the way Eddie had fallen in with Ben, Bill, Stan, and Richie. He recognized Patrick Hockstetter, and a kid with the same name as him, Eddie Corcoran. He turned around and saw that the starting line had disappeared. How long had they walked for? He hadn't packed a watch. His mother had packed a handkerchief and a bottle of Advil, but not a fucking watch.

"Hey, Stan."

Stan was still engrossed in his book. Upon closer inspection, it was a book about birds. One of those Audobon books. "Yeah? You're Kaspbrak, right?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to know if you've got the time."

He looked up at the sky. "9:20-ish."

"You aren't wearing a watch either! How do you know that?!"

"How warm it is, how bright it is, how many footsteps I've taken. I don't know. It's just scout sense, I guess."

"Do you really know?"

"Course I do."

"What if it rains? What if it's December?"

"There are different ways for every climate. And I said ish, didn't I?"

Eddie sighed. He supposed 9:20ish was what he would have estimated himself, too. He had an uneasy feeling in his stomach, because suddenly he was wondering if he'd see 9:20-ish AM tomorrow.

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**Kind of an exposition chapter, but ya know.**

### 3. Chapter 3

Eddie got his first lesson in the Long Walk grapevine right after they finished the first mile.

"Eddie Corcoran's stubbed his toe and he's limping," Stan said. "Tell Ben."

"Why've I got to tell Ben? He doesn't even know Corcoran. Neither do I!"

"I dunno. Just because. It's to get the word out, I guess."

"If Corcoran's gonna die, why does everybody have to know?!"

Stan considered it. "Everybody knows anyways. Might as well prepare the kids who'll get squeamish if it does happen." Eddie didn't mention to him that he was probably one of the kids who would get squeamish. Stan squinted at him like he was trying to figure out what he was thinking, then sighed. "Just tell Ben."

Eddie drew back a little to where Ben was walking by himself. "Hey, Ben. Eddie Corcoran stubbed his toe and has a limp. Pass it back to Bill."

Ben didn't even question it. "Okay, sure. Thanks for telling me." Eddie wondered what the boys had all discussed before the Walk that he apparently hadn't been in on. Feeling a little sour, he walked back up past Stan to where Richie was cleaning his glasses a few paces ahead. He was spraying them with a little clear bottle and rubbing them with a handkerchief of some kind.

"So you heard about Corcoran's foot." Richie sounded almost disappointed. "I wonder if he'll be our first lucky Walker to buy a ticket."

"Why do any of you care? It's not a sport or anything! Somebody's gonna...I've seen the Walk on TV!" Richie laughed. Eddie suddenly felt his face getting warm. "You guys all think I'm some silly kid, don't you? I'm scared, Richie! I'm scared because none of you are

scared! That's scary!"

"I'm sure you're scared enough for all of us, Eds." Richie gave him a smile that looked like the kind on a magazine cover. "Bless your soul," he added in a faux Southern accent. It sounded too much like him to be believable.

"So you are all making fun of me."

"I like you, Eddie. I look forward to walking with you." He flashed Eddie that smile again, and started walking fast again. He got up behind Bowers and his gang, where Eddie Corcoran was walking with his limp. Eddie wondered what the hell Richie was doing up there.

Eddie Corcoran was a big kid. He looked like he played football. But if a stubbed toe had gotten him limping, he had to be pretty weak. But then the word came back again.

"Corcoran's foot swelled up," Stan said, his face grave.

"What'd he do to it?!"

"I don't know. That's the crazy thing. I don't think anybody really does. Not even him."

Bill and Ben were walking side by side now, and Bill was writing rapidly in his notebook. Eddie fell in behind them, becoming an unspoken part of their conversation. "I like to write poetry," Ben was saying. "I like to write them about things I think are pretty, you know? Or things I feel really strongly about. I feel like that's what poems are for."

Bill nodded. Eddie noticed how many freckles he had; they dotted his skin like little periods with no sentences in front of them. "P-poems have always been hard for me."

"Maybe I can teach you. I don't know if poems are something you can teach people, but we have awhile, so I guess I can try." Both laughed.

"Stan wanted me to tell you, Ben. Corcoran's foot is swollen." Eddie felt weird, getting in between their somewhat intimate poetry conversation.

"I already h-heard that. I hear it's all p-purple!" Bill said.

"Jesus, really?" Eddie felt a little ill at that image. From the expression on his face, Ben shared that sentiment.

"Isn't Corcoran with Bowers? I dunno how bad I can feel for him if he likes that guy."

"Yeah, but he's still a person. He didn't even know Bowers before this. I...I don't want him to die." Eddie swallowed.

Bill had been walking silently. "C-can you not say that word? D-die, I mean. It sk-skeeves me out."

"Okay. Sorry," Eddie said, feeling terrible at the forlorn look Bill's face had taken on. The question of why was on the tip of his tongue, but his conscience told him it would probably be a bad idea to ask.

"It's not that I'm a p-pansy," Bill said. "It's j-just that I..."

"I get it." Ben patted him on the shoulder. Eddie found himself falling behind them, and just let it happen. He looked at the endless fields of grass on either side of the highway, and the sky, which had settled into the late morning's cornflower blue. In the distance, he could see the faint purple outline of mountains. He hoped they didn't have to climb any mountains.

"Warning! Warning 9!" It was Eddie Corcoran. He was still walking, but he'd slowed below the speed minimum. Eddie was suddenly glad they used the numbers and not the names. It would have killed him to hear his name being shouted like that, even if it wasn't for him.

Corcoran snapped something at the soldier that was apparently witty, because the boys around him laughed. He knelt down and fiddled with his shoelace, then stood back up again. "Second warning, 9!"

Eddie was suddenly inexplicably drawn to the boy who shared his name, and sped up his pace. Bowers and Hockstetter were clustered around Corcoran, so Eddie waited for an instant when Corcoran drew outside of their little clump.

"Hi," he began. Corcoran had a babyish face, but a scowl of

concentration on his features. "You're Eddie Corcoran, right?"

"Yeah. Who the hell are you?"

"Eddie Kaspbrak. I'm Eddie, too." He laughed, trying to make it sound naturally. "How're you doing?"

"Alright. My foot hurts."

"My mother packed some Neosporin. Do you want any?"

"Sure." Eddie Corcoran gave him a little half-hearted smile. "I can walk off another warning to put some on. You think I can do it, right?"

"Yeah. I think you could." Eddie reached back and pulled the little tube out of his packsack. "Here. From one Eddie to another." Eddie Corcoran laughed and took it from him and sat down on the road and pulled off his shoe. He fumbled to unscrew the cap. Eddie wondered how long it would be before he got a warning. He didn't have to wonder very long.

"Warning! Third warning 9!" Eddie Corcoran's shoe was off now. His foot *was* purple. Eddie felt the urge to look away, but couldn't, and began walking backwards. He was rubbing the cream on his bare, bruised foot. Oh my god, Eddie thought suddenly. He's got to get up. He's got to. He's got practically a second or they're going to...

Eddie Corcoran started to his feet, but stumbled, his face suddenly contorting in pain when he stepped on the concrete with his bare foot. He fell down. Eddie swore you could have heard a pin drop in that moment. The whole Walk was silent. Then came the soldiers and their guns.

Eddie Corcoran's eyes were shut. He just kept rubbing Eddie's mother's Neosporin on his foot. He was whispering something. And then they took him. Blood spattered on his sweatshirt. His hand drooped where it'd been rubbing his foot. The Neosporin tube lay next to his dead body. Eddie realized, suddenly, that he was crying. Oh god. But the strangest thing was that he was oddly sad that he'd never see that tube of Neosporin ever again. What would become of

it? He'd have to tell his mother.

"If you wanted to kill a man, oxygen whore, you did good." Henry Bowers was beside him. He didn't think 'oxygen whore' was anything he'd ever been called before. "Congratulations. The first down on the Walk and it's your kill. Didja plan it? I underestimated you!"

"Stop!" Eddie yelled. "Just stop it! Fuck you!" With those words came the strange discovery that no one was around to keep him from saying them.

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**Fun, fun chapter. The action's started now.**



## 4. Chapter 4

"I killed him," Eddie said to no one in particular. Henry Bowers had chuckled maliciously, then left him alone. He wondered what it would feel like to be the only guy left. Would you feel like you'd killed all the others, even if you hadn't?

"No, you didn't." Richie's voice. "Eddie, you didn't kill anybody. I don't think you could hurt a fly."

"You don't get it! I killed him! I thought he could just put the cream on his foot and then get up, and because I misjudged it, he's dead!"

"Eddie, look at me." Eddie did. "If there was no Walk and you were just on the street and you ran into that Corcoran guy and his foot was hurting and you gave him your cream, do you think he would've died? Absolutely-fucking-not. You didn't kill him. You didn't put the guns to his head. And the Long Walk's voluntary, for crying out loud! We got ourselves into this!" Richie sounded the most afraid Eddie had heard him yet. "It's a mass suicide!" He put on The Major's deep, husky voice. "But remember, gentlemen, keep hint 13 in mind and don't drop dead!"

"You're going to get yourself killed," Eddie said, his voice sounding hoarse. "You shouldn't make fun of him like that. You're going to get yourself killed."

"Regardless of The Major, you didn't kill Corcoran, Eddie. There's no time to regret it. What's done is done."

"Richie, I...I didn't come here because I wanted to commit suicide. Did you?"

"Of course I didn't. I came because why the hell not? What the hell was stopping me? I'm a reasonably fit young man of fifteen to eighteen. I'm perfect for the Walk. So why the hell not?"

Something in his tone made Eddie not believe him. Stan interrupted them before Eddie could ask Richie why he lied so much. "We're almost two miles in and no crowds! I'm thrilled. I can concentrate a

lot better when people aren't watching me. I don't know what I'll do when the crowds come."

"Imagine them in their underwear," Richie said wryly. "Especially the pretty girls." Stan gave him a half-hearted glare.

As though Stan had predicted it, when they rounded the next bend the beginnings of a crowd lined the sides of the road. There were boys in jerseys and cheerleader girls with big, red pom-poms. Henry Bowers whistled at a few of them. Their tall, basketball player boyfriends drew arms around them as though they were marking them as possessions. Eddie had always hated guys like that. They thought everybody who so much as looked at their girl was trying to steal her. He'd always wanted to shout at them "She isn't that great anyways! Why're you trying to smother her?!"

Stan's beige skin had paled a little and he was swallowing hard. "I don't like it," he said. "Everybody watching me. What if I have to take a shit?"

"You just do it," Richie said cryptically. "There's no right or wrong way. Just do it and be done with it."

"You say that like you've taken a shit in front of half the population of Maine before."

"Maybe I have." Richie said this with a totally serious expression. Eddie snorted. He realized that he'd almost forgotten Eddie Corcoran. He'd died in front of their eyes no more than twenty minutes ago and Eddie had almost forgotten all about him. He felt ill.

Somebody in the crowd called out Bill's name. That roused a few others to join in-no pretty girls, all mostly adults. Somebody had a sign with 'BILL DENBROUGH' on it. Bill lowered his head, his face somewhat red. "Isn't he a lucky guy?" Richie said, a twinge of jealousy in the question.

"I think it's sick," Eddie said. "I don't want anybody to have my name up on a sign."

"Why not? If we're out here to die, we'd might as well die with people

knowing our names."

"Just shut up, will you?" Eddie said tiredly.

"Of course. I aim to please, Eds."

Eddie drew his attention to the boys ahead of him. Ben was walking by himself now, his brow furrowed and his eyes focused ahead of him. It was like he was wearing blinders so he couldn't look at the crowd. But they were imaginary ones. He looked like he was fighting not to look at them.

"You okay, Ben?"

"Yeah. I just don't want to look at all those high schoolers, kids that like, could have been in this with us. It's making me feel sick."

Eddie decided he'd try some of the food on his food belt. He stuck his hand into a pouch on his right hip. He pulled out a little energy bar wrapped in silver plastic, unwrapped it and stuck it in his mouth. It was pretty tasteless, but it felt good to eat something. He put the wrapper back into the pouch. He wasn't about to litter, not even now.

He then took his canteen and sipped it experimentally. The water was sweet and cold, but there was a slight metallic taste to it. He swallowed it and coughed. He felt fine. He felt pretty good, actually. No foot pain, no asthma attack, no hunger. He felt like he was on a morning walk to the supermarket, not the Long Walk.

But then he remembered Eddie Corcoran. He looked around at the boys walking near him. Would one of them be next? Would the next person who got a cramp or stubbed his toe be Richie, or Ben, or Stan? Or him?

"So, we all joined with the Prize in mind, am I right?" Richie broke him out of his train of thought. "What does everybody want?"

"A zoo. Named after me. With a lot of cool animals for little kids to look at," Stan said. "And a ton of money to charity. I'm Jewish so it'd look bad if I didn't put a little into charity, but I want some money to go to some Jewish organizations to help kids or something."

"I think I'd use it for somebody else." Ben didn't elaborate.

"A fancy typewriter," Bill said. "And sp-speech therapy."

Eddie considered it. "I don't know."

"Oh, come on, you guys could have anything and you want that stuff?"

"Well, what do you want, Richie?" Stan asked pointedly.

"I'm waiting to see what I want at the end of the Walk. If you stay alive long enough, maybe I'll tell you later." He winked. Eddie found himself a little afraid of Richie and a little afraid of himself. The thing that scared him most was that he had forgotten there even was a Prize before now.

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**Well.**